

Legal Empowerment in Action: Evaluating Paralegal Models in Pakistan

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ACCCESS TO JUSTICE is recognized as a fundamental right and an essential component of any society (Sheikh & Mohyuddin, 2019). Yet, for many people in Pakistan, particularly those from marginalized groups, this right remains distant. Despite constitutional guarantees and Pakistan's commitment to international human rights frameworks, the country's justice system faces numerous barriers that hinder access (Khan et al., 2025). For the citizens, the justice system feels daunting, inaccessible, and expensive. Long delays in case resolution, procedural complexities, and the high cost of legal representation are just some of the issues that discourage people from pursuing justice (Khan & Ahmed, 2024). It is evident through World Bank's Summary Statistics for Rule of Law (1996-2018) that Pakistan's score is far less than the average of countries in its own categories (Ahmad & von Wangenheim, 2021).

In rural settings, the concept of personal prestige acts as a barrier to seeking formal justice. Consequently, many turn to informal systems like *jirga* (tribal council or traditional dispute resolution assembly) and *panchayat* (village council or traditional local governance body), which often resort to coercive, authoritarian and subjective appeals as there is a lack of accountability (Sheikh & Mohyuddin, 2019). These systems reinforce harmful power structures, particularly against women and religious minorities. While a number of laws exist for the protection of women on paper, their implementation is concerning, which deteriorates access to justice, particularly for gender groups that are in a marginalized position (Saleem et al., 2024). Similar is the case with religious minorities. Sectarian violence is common, where legal structures fail to put an end to such cases. Pernicious use of blasphemy law also leads to violation of non-Muslims' rights and treats them as second-class citizens (Malik, 2002).

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In response to these structural challenges, the concept of legal empowerment has gained increasing attention as a sustainable and community-driven solution. It aims to “empower people to know, use and shape the law, to advance their rights to key public services.” (Joshi et al., 2022, p. 2). In Pakistan, this approach is being operationalized through a range of grassroots organizations and initiatives. They ensure community mobilization and legal literacy through paralegals, who inform people of their rights and help empower them to access justice systems and seek legal remedies for their issues (Joshi et al., 2022). Thus, paralegals play an important role in helping underserved populations navigate legal systems that are often inaccessible, intimidating, or unresponsive. Although they are not licensed lawyers, paralegals are trained to assist people with legal processes, raise awareness of legal rights, and connect individuals to justice institutions. Their value lies in their proximity to the communities they serve, making them trusted and approachable sources of support for people facing legal challenges. In many contexts, paralegals act as the first point of contact for legal help and empowering individuals to take action (Braithwaite, 2015). Increasingly recognized as a key component of legal empowerment strategies, paralegals offer a grassroots approach to bridging the justice gap. Especially in contexts where formal legal aid is limited or unevenly distributed, community-based and institutional paralegal models offer a sustainable way to increase legal literacy, build confidence, and enable more people to engage with the justice system (Diehl, 2009).

About the Organizations

A prominent model of paralegal integration in Pakistan can be seen through the work of two sister organizations, the Legal Aid Society (LAS)-Pakistan and the Committee for the Welfare of Prisoners (CWP).

The Committee for the Welfare of Prisoners (CWP) is a government-funded not-for-profit Committee dedicated to improving access to justice through provision of pro bono legal representation services to Unsentenced or Under-Trial Prisoners (UTPs) across twenty prisons in Sindh, Pakistan. Since its establishment in 2004, the Committee has significantly expanded its operations and continued to play a crucial role in supporting these UTPs, thereby enhancing the delivery of justice for the marginalized and contributing to improving the criminal justice system in Pakistan at large.

The Legal Aid Society (LAS) is an independent offshoot of the CWP, aiming to improve access to justice for all citizens, particularly those who are marginalized and underprivileged, since the year 2013. It is a not-for-profit non-governmental organization (NGO), the mission of which is to connect the vulnerable and disempowered end-users of justice such as women, children, transgender, religious minorities and low income communities with effective and expedient services for the delivery of justice. It further works to protect, promote and ensure the knowledge of, and access to, fundamental rights by working on thematic areas such as Access to Justice, Gender and Child Security, and Climate Resilience, Sustainability and Security.

These organizations work simultaneously on the demand and supply sides of the justice system, raising legal awareness at the community level to help people understand and demand their rights, while also training and collaborating with key justice sector actors such as police, judges and lawyers to strengthen institutional responsiveness and accountability.

In 2017, CWP introduced a paralegal program within the Central and Women's Prisons in Karachi, with the aim of promoting legal literacy among UTPs. Recognizing that many prisoners lacked even a basic understanding of their rights or the status of their cases, the program was designed to equip them with the knowledge necessary to navigate the justice system



2023 training of trainers conducted with UTPs in prison as part of prison paralegal program.

more effectively. Following its initial success, the program was expanded to the Central Prisons in Hyderabad and Sukkur. What sets the CWP model apart is that the paralegals are themselves UTPs, selected from within the prison population. These peer paralegals are trained and supported to conduct weekly legal literacy classes for their fellow inmates. Each class covers one of seven key legal topics, with participants selected at random from the prison population. Through these sessions, UTPs gain a clearer understanding of their legal status, available legal remedies, and prison regulations.¹

Parallel to the prison-based paralegal initiative, LAS has implemented a comprehensive community-based paralegal model since 2014. LAS designs its projects with a long-term sustainability lens, and the paralegal system forms a key part of its strategy to ensure that the impact of legal interventions continues well beyond the life of individual projects. Paralegals at LAS are carefully selected on a voluntary basis, considering factors such as their proximity to the community, familiarity with local issues, understanding of legal and human rights, and passion for advocacy. After receiving comprehensive training, these paralegals work closely with LAS's field teams to carry out legal awareness sessions, support community members in addressing legal issues, and refer cases for formal legal representation.

Despite operating in different contexts (CWP within prisons and LAS in communities), both organizations share a common vision: to make the justice system more accessible by equipping people with the tools and knowledge to engage with it effectively. In both models, paralegals are not supplementary actors but core components of the access to justice strategy. Whether peer educators inside correctional facilities or mobilizers in communities, paralegals act as enablers of justice.

This article presents findings from a preliminary evaluation of the paralegal programs implemented by CWP and LAS. The evaluation was initiated to systematically assess the impact of the paralegal system across various programs and thematic areas at the organizational level. It aimed to measure the effectiveness of the paralegal system, along with capturing insights regarding the sustainability that it promises for the future. This evaluation also assessed the impact of paralegals on legal awareness in the communities and prisons.



2024 monitoring visit to evaluate the effectiveness of a community awareness session conducted by a paralegal.

Evaluation Design

The evaluation of the paralegal programs implemented by CWP and LAS was guided by three out of six OECD-DAC evaluation criteria: effectiveness, sustainability and impact (OECD-DAC, n.d.). The table below further expands on what each of the three criteria measure in the context of the evaluation.

Table 1: Overview of the key criteria and their measurements

| Criteria | Description | Evaluation Questions |
|---------------|---|---|
| Effectiveness | The extent to which the system has achieved, or is expected to achieve, its objectives, and its results, including any differential results across target groups. (Is the system achieving its desired objectives?) | To what extent have the paralegals effectively raised legal awareness within prisons and communities? |

| | | |
|----------------|--|---|
| Sustainability | The extent to which the net benefits of the system continue, or are likely to continue in the future. (Will the benefits last?) | How sustainable is the paralegal system expected to be in maintaining and advancing prisoners' and community's awareness and legal empowerment after the conclusion of project interventions? |
| Impact | The extent to which the system has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects. (What difference does the system make?) | What significant impact, both intended and unintended, has the paralegal system had on the communities and prisoners and how does this impact align with the overall organizational goal? |

While the evaluation framework remained consistent across both organizations, the design and tools were adapted to suit the different environments in which the paralegals operate.

For the CWP program, implemented within prison settings, the evaluation primarily focused on effectiveness and some early indicators of impact. This was done through a feedback questionnaire gauging the perceived effectiveness of the legal literacy sessions. The data collection drew from a population of one hundred fifteen UTPs engaged between February to May 2024, with a follow-up rapid evaluation conducted in September–October 2024 with a final sample of twenty-three UTPs. The results thus consisted of the twenty-three UTPs with whom the rapid evaluation was conducted. Feedback regarding the program was also gathered from UTPs and paralegals. Figure 1 explains the definition of each stakeholder group and their respective criteria.

For the LAS programs, which operate in community-based settings, the evaluation assessed all three OECD-DAC (criteria, effectiveness, sustainability and impact), given the broader field engagement. The evaluation engaged both supply-side actors (paralegals) and demand-side actors (beneficiaries and general community members) to assess whether the program was meeting its intended objectives across stakeholder groups. Three distinct stakeholder groups were involved: one hundred thirty-three paralegals (engaged through Focus Group Discussions [FGDs] and Key Informant Interviews [KIs]), one hundred forty program beneficiaries (engaged through Community Feedback Surveys for beneficiaries), and three hundred seventy-eight general community members (engaged through Community Feedback Surveys for general community). Figure 2 explains the definition of each stakeholder group and their respective criteria. Sampling for paralegals was

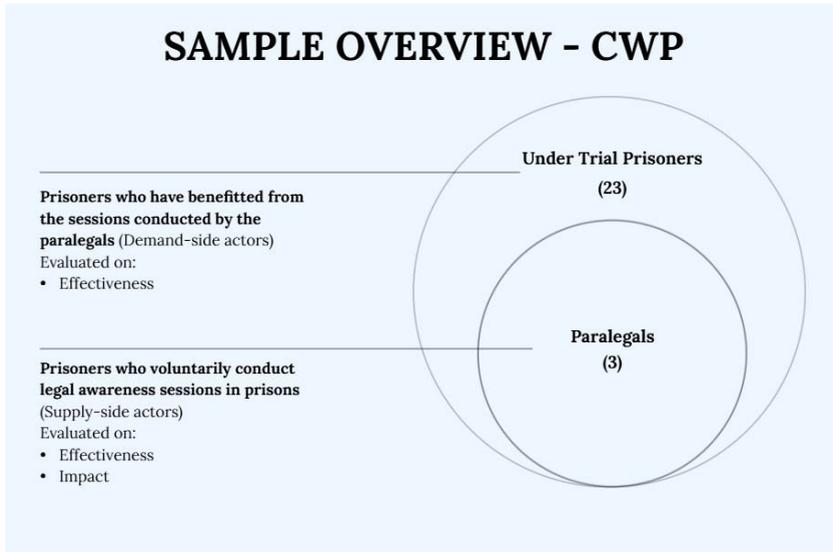


Figure 1: Sample overview for CWP

stratified by gender, district, and experience (minimum twelve months) to ensure representativeness across LAS’s major programs. Gender-separated FGDs were held to ensure paralegals’ comfort, and experienced paralegals were purposely selected for KIIs. Beneficiaries were selected through a mix of random and convenience sampling, depending on the program context and availability, while the general community was engaged through convenience-based outreach during field activities. The evaluation took place from July to November 2024, progressing from planning and tool development to data collection, analysis and final review.

Findings

1. Effectiveness

Findings from both the CWP and LAS programs point to the overall effectiveness of the paralegal model in increasing legal awareness, strengthening community outreach, and improving access to justice.

In CWP, there was a measurable improvement in legal knowledge. UTPs who attended paralegal-led sessions showed a 15 percent average increase across seven lessons. Participants largely found the sessions useful and

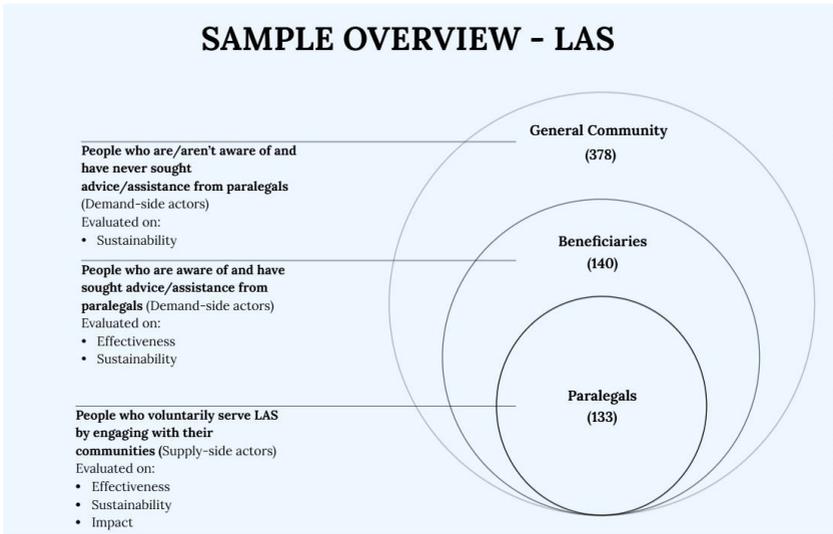


Figure 2: Sample overview for LAS

relevant: 87 percent agreed the content was relevant, 82 percent said they learned new concepts, and 85 percent rated the sessions as overall effective. The facilitator's knowledge was appreciated (87 percent agreement), and all respondents (100 percent) described paralegals as supportive and responsive.

CWP paralegals themselves reported a 57 percent increase in their legal knowledge post training. They expressed strong confidence in their role as 100 percent felt the topics were relevant and would recommend the role to others, but also highlighted the need for improved materials and additional support going forward.

Similar trends were reflected in LAS, where the paralegal program has not only built legal awareness but also community trust. Many paralegals expressed that the training sessions helped them learn about legal rights, laws and procedures, which they were previously unaware of. This knowledge empowered them to guide their community members effectively on matters such as property inheritance, early child marriage, domestic violence, and First Information Record (FIR) procedures.

A paralegal from Larkana reported:

I helped around 1000 trans individuals with regards to recovery of rightful property, legal action against threats and harassment, and secured employment for 30 individuals in NGOs.

Another paralegal from Shaheed Benazirabad shared:

There is a woman in my community whose husband took loans in her name and went to Dubai. I accompanied her to court for every hearing. This trust she placed in me is a true success of being a paralegal.



2024 focus group discussion with male paralegals



2024 focus group discussion with female paralegals

Community feedback further validated the model: 94 percent of beneficiaries said paralegals were accessible, 96 percent were satisfied with the timeliness of support, and 93 percent felt the conduct of paralegals was professional. The overall effectiveness score stood at 88 percent, confirming that paralegals are seen as reliable and trusted sources of support, often going beyond legal aid to help with services like disability registration, medical camps, and social protection linkages.

2. Sustainability

The paralegal model is viewed as a sustainable and long-term solution by both paralegals and community members. One of the strongest indicators of sustainability is the deep trust that communities have placed in paralegals. Because paralegals come from the same communities they serve, people feel comfortable approaching them for legal advice and dispute resolution. The trust they have built has led to word-of-mouth referrals, with more people seeking their support, showing that the model can grow organically and continue to function. Another sign of the model's sustainability is the legal awareness and empowerment it has generated. Many paralegals shared that they now better understand legal procedures, Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), and how to navigate cases, which is also translating into greater legal knowledge among community members. A paralegal from Sanghar corroborated this: *"It is long-term because we have provided them with essential information that will continue to be passed on. I don't think this knowledge will disappear anytime soon, so it's a very effective and sustainable system."* There is also a clear demand for the program's continuation and expansion. In various districts, paralegals noted that more people want to become part of the system, and communities have expressed a need for additional trained paralegals. Altogether, these factors suggest that the paralegal model is not just impactful in the short term, but built in a way that allows it to endure and adapt over time.

This perception of sustainability is also reflected in beneficiary and community feedback as 51 percent believed the program is highly sustainable and capable of continuing independently once project interventions end. However, when asked about potential challenges to sustainability, paralegals, beneficiaries, and community members identified several barriers that could hinder the system's ability to function without ongoing support. These included limited communication due to lack of mobile access, cul-

tural and gender-based barriers rooted in patriarchal and traditional power structures, and low awareness of paralegals and their role. Additionally, gaps in organizational support, paralegal motivation, and subject expertise were highlighted. Skepticism from families, especially toward women seeking help, was also shared as a reason. Another recurring concern was the lack of formal authority. Paralegals often lack identification cards or legal credentials, which undermines their credibility and limits their ability to engage effectively with communities and institutions. Moreover, challenges with external institutions such as police, courts and government offices, especially delays and bureaucratic hurdles, further restrict paralegals' ability to resolve cases, particularly those involving marginalized groups, affecting long-term trust and sustainability.

3. Impact

The paralegal program has had a visible and meaningful impact, both within prisons and in communities, by increasing legal awareness, strengthening individual confidence, and shifting attitudes around justice.

Among the UTPs, weekly peer-led sessions contributed to a stronger grasp of essential legal concepts. Participants reported clearer understanding of the trial process, prison rules, probation and relevant laws. This not only helped them make more informed decisions about their cases, but also enabled a greater sense of agency. The program's peer-to-peer format also created a support system inside the prison, where those with knowledge were able to guide others.

Paralegals themselves reported a transformation in how they see their role and abilities. Whether they were part of the CWP program or working in communities under LAS, many described an increase in confidence, better communication skills, and stronger legal understanding. They spoke of feeling more equipped to support others and deal with institutions. Over time, many came to view themselves not just as helpers, but as educators and community advocates. A paralegal from Khairpur shared, *"In the Christian community, cases of underage marriage were prevalent. With the support of LAS, we were able to help many young girls who had become victims of this issue."*

The program's ripple effect in communities has been especially significant. Paralegals described a shift from skepticism and silence around legal issues to a culture where people, especially women, now speak up about their



2023 group discussion during training of trainers for prison paralegal program

rights. In areas where there was once little awareness about legal processes or services like National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) or Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), people now turn to paralegals for help navigating these systems. A paralegal from Dadu reported, *“We have resolved 300 legal documentation issues, registered 45 women in social protection schemes and assisted poor families in obtaining ration bags.”* Taboos around issues like domestic violence and divorce are also starting to break down, replaced by more open discussions and a willingness to seek justice. A paralegal from Karachi said, *“I’ll share my own example. I got divorced and now my former husband regularly visits our children and also provides their maintenance. My process was handled through LAS. When people see that I am happy, they also trust LAS.”* This shift in mindset has built trust. Paralegals are increasingly seen as reliable, accessible figures within their communities and prisons, often the first point of contact for legal help. Their presence has helped bridge the gap between formal institutions and individuals who previously felt excluded or intimidated by legal systems. For many, especially women and young people, paralegals have become role models, people who not only provide information, but also inspire others to step forward and claim their rights. Table 2 provides a summary of the shifting perceptions and attitudes of the people post the paralegal program.

Table 2: Impact of paralegal program

| Then | Now |
|---|---|
| Limited awareness and skepticism about paralegal roles | Paralegals as trusted figures in the community, with people actively seeking their assistance |
| Marginalized groups remained silent on legal matters | Women increasingly vocal about their rights, particularly on domestic issues |
| Cultural barriers and doubt | Diminishing cultural barriers and societal taboos |
| Lack of knowledge about navigating legal systems and bureaucratic processes | Communities know how to access services like NADRA, BISP, etc. |
| Minimal confidence in legal support systems | Paralegals seen as bridges between communities and legal resources |
| Few role models for seeking justice and addressing rights issues | Empowered individuals spread awareness and inspire others |

Despite its overall success, the paralegal program faces several practical and systemic challenges that limit its effectiveness, impact and sustainability. In prisons, low literacy, language barriers, and the stressful environment hinder UTPs’ ability to engage with legal sessions. In communities, safety concerns, lack of formal recognition, limited resources like transport and phone access, and community skepticism, particularly toward NGOs, undermine paralegals’ work. Gender-specific barriers, such as family restrictions, lack of mobility further reduce access for women. These issues need to be addressed to strengthen the program’s reach and long-term viability.

Conclusion

Access to justice in Pakistan remains out of reach for many, especially those from marginalized communities who face structural and social barriers. The paralegal models implemented by CWP and LAS demonstrate the transformative potential of community-based legal empowerment to bridge these gaps.

By equipping individuals with legal knowledge and creating trusted points of contact within prisons and communities, these programs offer a scalable, rights-based approach to navigating a complex justice system. The impact of these models is evident; not only in increased legal awareness, but in the confidence, trust, and civic engagement they foster. Paralegals have become critical actors in shifting mindsets, enabling rights-claiming, and challenging exclusionary norms, especially for women, religious minorities

and vulnerable groups. Their dual role as educators and advocates positions them as a sustainable force for grassroots justice.

To ensure the long-term viability of this model, investments must address structural challenges: lack of formal recognition, limited institutional coordination, and persistent gender and social barriers. With stronger linkages to state mechanisms, greater resource support, and formal integration into legal aid ecosystems, the paralegal model can evolve from a project-based intervention to a permanent pillar of Pakistan's justice architecture.

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Endnote

¹ For a discussion of the CWP program as of 2019, see Haya Emaan Zahid and Shahzaman Panhwar, "Pakistan's Prison Paralegal Program," *Human Rights Education in Asia-Pacific*, volume 9, www.hurights.or.jp/archives/asia-pacific/section1/hreap_v9_sectoral_education5.pdf.